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BLYTHBOROUGH CHURCH, SUFFOLK<sup>1</sup>.

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It is no unusual thing to find in this country a vast and desolate church hard by the grass-grown ruins of an ancient monastic house. These are some of the scars of a violent and bitter struggle, and they are, perhaps, more evident in East Anglia than elsewhere because the wounds were there struck large and very deep. It will not be to the purpose now to go at all into that religious question, or to attempt to treat of the causes of the remarkable decay of commerce which gradually fell upon this once favoured district, further than to say generally, on the one hand, that Blythborough certainly suffered spiritually severely enough, and that commercially, on the other, it fell with the fate, as it had risen with the fortunes, of the ancient capital, sea-wasted Dunwich. Certain it is that the borough on the Blyth has changed, from a once populous centre to almost one of the waste places of the earth—a borough where, before the Conquest, the only “cambitor” of the district would be found, and where, to-day, one can hardly get change for sixpence; a solitude nearly as complete as that of Pæstum.

Yet, in spite of its earlier splendour, it seems almost a natural thing to find in this region of East Anglia, and in the neighbourhood of an ancient capital, a church entirely and systematically laid out in the latest Gothic style that has been happily named by Rickman, the “Perpendicular.”

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, February 3rd, 1887.

It is, indeed, the great style of the district. To mention only two other examples, as we shall have occasion to refer to them later on, in full sight from Blythborough is the sad ruined church of Walberswick with its noble tower dominating the country, and, further off, the spacious church of Southwold set back a trifle from the low cliffs, and sheltering that famous rood-screen, its fine parclose and the rare *Jack o' the Clock*.

Although our set purpose is with Blythborough's Perpendicular church it may do no harm, in the first place, to touch lightly upon the earlier history of the spot, and, without going any further back, we may start with the universal masters—the Romans. That the site of Blythborough was by nature adapted for a centre of some kind of civilization may be at once inferred from its position on a silent highway. It may be sufficient for us now to point out (as Dr. Raven has done in a little paper on Blythborough printed in the *Suffolk Transactions*) as regards the Roman period, that two roads cross the Blyth at this point. One leads from Aldeborough to Beccles, in a nearly straight line; the other, not so direct, passes from ancient Dunwich to Bungay, and along both these lines we have the familiar names of *Street* and *Stone Street*. Dr. Raven has suggested that here may have been a slightly intrenched camp occupied by a band of Stablesian horse, part of the forces of the Count of the Saxon Shore; that we might imagine a light Liburnian galley in the broad by Walberswick, and horsemen riding away over the stone street for the great camp on the Yare, or through Bungay for Caistor. It is a very likely sketch, but not a stone or tile remains above ground at Blythborough to vivify a picture of an item in the military grasp that held the world. The earth has surrendered no milestone at Blythborough, no legionary tile, no altar dedicated, or soldier's tombstone; only a few urns and funeral remains have been found in the track and of the period of the ancient civilization here which passed away fifteen centuries ago.

From the departure of the Romans to the time of King Edward is a long, and a distracting, and a bloody step. Paganism and Christianity, war and uncertain peace alternate, fitfully brightened by the ministry of such men

as St. Sigbert, or Felix, the Burgundian, or confused and darkened by incessant raids, harryings, and rapine.

Chief among the events that stirred Blythborough in its early days must be mentioned the war in the middle of the seventh century between Penda, the Pagan king of Mercia, and Anna, Christian king of the East Angles. The latter is said to have fallen with his son Firminius at Blythborough, and tradition has long placed the sepulchre of king Anna in Blythborough church. The recondite archæology of the parish clerk in this matter, apparently based upon the aphorism that "seeing is believing" has appropriated a fifteenth century Purbeck monument for the coeval tomb of the king, which spot is complacently pointed out as the place where Anna lies; and so the tomb of the last of the Swillingtons, upon the same principle, has been set back eight hundred years and becomes the grave of Firminius. To go from fancy to fact, the bones of Anna and his son were first interred in the Saxon church at Blythborough and subsequently taken to Bury, and, as to the Saxon church, not only does not one stone remain upon another, but not one single stone exists at all, at least not recognizable as Saxon work, in the present church. The only memorial of the king and his son now appears to be certain of the series of large crowned Lombardic letters in flint and stone beneath the east window outside. This inscription has, however, never been, as far as we know, quite clearly deciphered. From the death of Anna to the time of the Confessor, all that is known or may be inferred with regard to the story of Blythborough, falls so much into the general history of Dunwich, with its long list of Saxon prelates, that, without going somewhat out of our track and proposed treatment, it will not be to our purpose to follow it in that direction, further than to notice that the place was certainly of considerable importance in the time of King Edward, though it had declined when the Great Record was drawn up. We gather from the Conqueror's Survey that there was a church at Blythborough in Saxon times, and that it possessed two carucates of land, nine villeins, and four bordarii. That church, and any earlier one, as has been before intimated, have totally vanished, but the record is important to us in a way since it brings us at

once upon our ground, for undoubtedly the present church stands upon the ancient ecclesiastical site. This church clearly owes its building to the Black Canons of the Augustinian Priory founded here by the Abbot of St. Osyth, in Essex, to whom Henry I had given the tythes of Blythborough. The date of the first building of this priory was probably towards the end of the first quarter of the twelfth century, the house being planted on ground north-east of the church, and rising above the south bank of the river Blyth. It is not improbable that this particular spot was the site of a Roman encampment. Suckling speaks of the conventual church of St. Mary as "a spacious cross-aisled fabric," and he is probably right; but this statement must be based not so much upon the poor slight views of the remains of the priory in Grose's *Ancient Reliques*, and Kirby's *Suffolk Traveller*, as upon the fact that the house had early acquired considerable revenues, as is set forth in the original charter of 1199, rehearsed at length in a charter of confirmation of 21 Henry VI. Yet, although the number of canons was ever small, the house was not a cell to St. Osyth's, but, as Gardner calls it, "a daughter house." There were only three canons and a prior in 1475, and five altogether at the time of the suppression. The isolated fragments of Norman work, that exist in the parish, prove the early building, and the late pointed arches to be seen in Grose's views show that, as usual, the work of the building went on for centuries. There are also certain evidences, in walls of common buildings near the east end of the churchyard, showing that the monastic walls extended up hill in this direction. The melancholy ruins standing in the field called the Abbey Piece are, to all outward view, mere blocks of wall-core, thickly clothed with the vicious, rampant, vampire ivy, the curse of antiquaries, but beloved of owls, picnic revellers, and sketching young ladies.

When the troubles culminated the Priory fell into the hands of King Henry VIII, who granted it and all its possessions to Sir Arthur Hopton, November 12th, 1538. Within half a century its records had vanished in the usual scandalous manner; indeed, few features are more remarkable or more lamentable in the history



of the Dissolution than the rapidity with which the documentary evidences of the suppressed houses were alienated from, or by, the new possessors, lost, burnt, stolen, hidden, or contemptuously and ignorantly allowed to perish. The number of MSS. which may be found utilized to form the binding of early printed books, shows how great the destruction was on this head alone. The united and priceless evidences of a large part of the common and local life of the nation were comprized in the records of the religious houses, and these were supinely suffered to pass away, and this at the moment when grammar schools were arising, and when the printing press was well advanced in its beneficent course. Equally remarkable, and surely not less to be lamented, is the destruction of the fabrics themselves. It was not alone :—"The swift illapse of accident disastrous" but the wicked and violent havoc of dull fools, or bigoted ignorance and sheer vulgar greed. Thus, for instance, have we seen, as some of the quite minor results, such things as alabaster angels finding a last refuge in a hogsty, and monumental effigies of high ecclesiastics doing duty as gate posts.

Three hundred and fifty years after the death struggle, we, of this generation, can pace the green turf covering of the sites of the houses of the ancient faith with the calmness with which we tread upon the grave of a long dead friend. We can hardly, nay, we cannot possibly realize the agony which thousands of cultivated and generous spirits passed through when the great tragedy came, with its deep salutary lessons. True, indeed, is it, as was said by the greatest critic of antiquity, that tragedy has a purifying power because it displays noble examples of suffering. At Blythborough affairs were certainly not happier than elsewhere, and the historical intelligence to be gleaned now from records is but meagre and imperfect. As to the fabric, the walls of the Priory were pilfered from and dragged all over the country side, and at the latter end of the last century a quantity of material was taken from the then existing remains to make the adjoining bridge, and form its approaches over the Blyth. Thus two centuries and a half after the last Prior had mouldered away, the fabric of the house fulfilled, in one sense, the

obligation determined by an Inquisition taken in 1237, that the Prior of Blythborough should mend Blythborough bridge.

We would not, if we could, trench in any sense any further in or upon the domain over which Mr. St. John Hope rules so well. We believe he has not seen Blythborough, so we would merely say that, even to our unpractised eye, there seem indications in the cornfield of foundations which he so well knows how to render eloquent with history. We trust, therefore, that some day he will re-write from the foundation stones some of the story which has perished with the records.

Our "time runs posting on," but from the Priory Church of St. Mary to the parish church of the Holy Trinity, is but a step. Let us take it.

We see at once that here we have a structure of no common kind, and one which the ordinary resources of the priory could not have provided. As we walk round the church, before going in, we become gradually more aware of the justness of the proportion of the building, the happy combinations of light and shadow, wall and window space—perhaps an extreme critic might think there is too much of the latter—the elegance of the open parapet of the south aisle and porch, and the striking array of traceried windows.

With regard to the material church outside, the walls are formed, as at Walberswick, and Dunwich, of shore pebbles combined with very hard mortar, with an outer surface or skin of irregular split flints of various sizes, with here and there the important addition of a long stone set in endways after the Roman manner, tying the shell to the core. The joints average a width of half-an-inch, and are stuck full, especially in the clerestory walls, of clean sharp flint chips, which have successfully baffled the tooth of time. The flat pilasters above and the buttresses below are set with squared flints, closely jointed. Thus internally the integrity of the wall is completely maintained by the firmness of the mortar, while externally the flint facing is, under its local conditions, practicably imperishable. The relieving arches of the windows are formed of alternate voussoirs of flints, and bricks  $8\frac{3}{4}$ in. long and 2in. thick, and the tracery, &c., throughout is of fine limestone. We

have particularized the material of the fabric because it is important to recognize on every opportunity, and, considering the expensive notions of builders now-a-days, how constantly and how successfully the mediæval architects were satisfied to adapt themselves, and, to a certain extent, the character of their style, to the materials which lay ready to their hand in setting up the main fabric of their churches. In its first freshness Blythborough church must have presented a dry and harsh appearance. Since then nature has touched it with the softening tints and mysterious growth of that wonderful parasite lichen. The joints have taken a flat and thin covering of grey, pale yellow, and brown, the stone has acquired a grey covering, the flint almost refuses to be hidden, while, here and there, in places where the moisture would hang longest, are blots of bright Naples yellow, giving a rich and varied appearance to the whole.

Entering the church under one of the buttresses flying with a half-arch over the north door, its admirable proportions become more apparent, and it is impossible to believe that chance had any hand in the design. Here must have been a principle carefully worked out. We know, of course, that Gothic architects, like designers of all periods, worked upon principles, but it would be a bold thing to say that one rule may be applied to the whole course of Gothic. Each style seems to have had its requirements, and the character of the proportion so admirable in the Norman tower at Tewkesbury would certainly be most disastrous in the different style of the central tower at Salisbury. Again, who would venture to improve the former by adding a cubit, raze the parapets of Gloucester, or tamper with the proportions of the western towers of Westminster? Why is the stumpy Norman tower of Stewkeley satisfactory to the eye, and the modern tower and church of St. Paul's, Burton, bewildering and distressing in its proportions? What makes the interior of Westminster Abbey a perfect harmony or the exterior of the New Law Courts, a hopeless confusion of—shall we say—melodies? or discords? It cannot be always a mere question of eye, because men's eyes may be taken to be as capable now as they were in the Middle Ages; we are therefore driven to the conclusion

that in our modern buildings we have not yet sufficiently unravelled Gothic in its really most important quality, however much we may have copied it, or burlesqued it; and it would further appear that until the subject of proportion becomes more generally considered in the modern architectural curriculum, we shall continue to suffer many a pang when moving about the country. Indeed the question of proportion is one of the most difficult and obscure problems into which the human mind can enter. It is, however, now, a question which is incidental, rather than essential to the matter in hand.

As regards the ground plan of Blythborough, it consists of a continuous nave of eight bays, of which the two last to the east, together with a deep walled sacrarium, of the length of two more bays, form the chancel. This continuous church is flanked north and south by aisles running straight through to the sacrarium walls, the chancel and chancel-aisles being divided from the church by lofty screens running north and south, straight across, and one bay eastward enclosing the choir; a vaulted porch with a room over at the west end of the south aisle, and a tower of singular plainness at the west end of the nave completes the plan, which, whatever ancient site it may occupy, has been in no way hampered by any remains of an earlier building. Thus the whole thing being of one period it may be imagined that it is somewhat devoid of the long human interest of churches which have gradually grown from small beginnings; but we shall endeavour to show that, even in its fallen state, Blythborough church gives ample evidences that what it loses in this regard is fully compensated for in other ways, and that in its ancient Perpendicular integrity, thanks to the skill of the Canons, and the gifts or bequests of the Greyses, Hoptons, Swillingtons and others, it must once have been a kind of epitome of fifteenth century ecclesiastical art in most of its branches.

There are many bequests in ancient wills to the building of the church. A few will suffice to fix the date. John Greyse left twenty marks towards the rebuilding of the chancel in 1442; John Aleyn in 1462 gave forty shillings for glazing a window in the chancel; other bequests were made to it in 1453 and 1454, and



some as late as 1473. In 1442 John Greyse gave money for lead for the bell tower, and Henry Tool gave a great bell in 1470. No doubt the chancel, the *ecclesia* proper, was first built, then the nave, and lastly the tower, when money fell short, the whole work being carried out between 1440 and 1475. In 1452 John Hopton founded a Chantry in honour of St. Margaret the Virgin.

Now, there is nothing unusual in the plan, and a casual observer set suddenly down in the church would immediately perceive that he was in a late Perpendicular building; the continuous nave and chancel arcades alone, irrespective of any details, would at once tell him so much, and he would be a dull observer indeed if he did not also immediately recognize that he was in East Anglia and not in West Saxony, and far away from the land of the pestilent Flamboyant.<sup>1</sup> Carrying the eye upwards, it is arrested at the height of thirteen feet six inches by the long line of moulded capitals supporting the arcades, with slightly varied details in the chancel; past the brilliant clerestory of thirty-six two-light traceried windows, it rests upon the roof running in an unbroken length from tower to east wall, and still rich with angels and painting, and teeming with the heraldry of many an ancient house. The east window is modern, and those north and south in the sacrarium are both built up; from the remaining tracery it is evident that they follow the rest. That on the north side shows a plain tracery head of two lights, the south window being, as is often the case, for certain ritual requirements, a much larger window with the remains of tracery showing that it was a fine production, with two stories of tracery, similar to those now remaining in the north and south chancel aisles. The tracery in these windows is a little earlier in character than the others in the nave aisles, which latter are filled with Perpendicular tracery of the usual kind with con-

<sup>1</sup> It may be convenient to recall the general differences between the Perpendicular of these two districts—the land of stone and the land of flint. For West Saxony Martock church is the type, and for East Anglia the church of Brightlingsea is an excellent example.

*Windows.*—West Saxony: One large

window in each bay; East Anglia: two small windows in the same position.

*Capitals.*—West Saxony: Square abaci; East Anglia: Hexagonal or octagonal abaci. For more detailed comparison, see Mr. Freeman's "Remarks on Brightlingsea Church," *Journal*, V, xxxiii, p. 425, and on "Martock Church," *Journal*, xxxvi, p. 408.

structing transoms. The whole of these aisle windows occupy the greater part of the space between the buttresses, and, though perhaps a trifle coarse, they are admirable frameworks for the painted glass, which they formerly contained.

It will be remembered that Professor Willis showed long ago, in one of his lucid lectures on the spot, namely at Gloucester cathedral, that there is the cradle of Perpendicular. Many of his audience were then sceptical, but he carried those most capable of appreciating his genius with him, as he took them unerringly step by step to his point.

Once only in a generation arises a Professor and Master such as he was. Perhaps some day another equally gifted will again start from Gloucester; will track this great and essentially English style in all its rapid movements; will map out its ramifications and local peculiarities; and show how its wonderful carpentry and vaulting grew. Then may we hope to have a clear insight into the course of Perpendicular, follow its progress alike through West Saxony and East Anglia, see its tenacity and late lingering at the Universities (particularly in the Bodleian and Clare College), and finally its death in an Elizabethan house, choked by an alien Renaissance.

It is hardly fair to say that the advancing requirements of painted glass, originated Perpendicular architecture, but, certainly painted glass influenced and, perhaps, sometimes determined the tracery. Much of the latter is a harsh and unmeaning skeleton, divested of its proper fitting, but what more beautiful artistic thing than the genuine tracery with its genuine glass!

There must have been a glorious array of glass at Blythborough in its prime, if we are to judge from the quality of what remains, and the accounts that have come down to us. That uncompromising iconoclast, William Dowsing, broke down two hundred and twenty superstitious pictures, but the heads of several of the aisle windows still remain.

As to the rest of the glazing, the clerestories have been newly filled with clear glass, and the aisle windows, with the above-mentioned exceptions, completed, filled with thick glass of a ghastly yellow hue—the very worst of all substi-

tutes for painted glass, and to which the astounding name of "Cathedral Glass" is given. What cathedral is answerable for this sickly abomination, or why "cathedral" at all, we need not stay to enquire. But if we cannot have the real thing, we are tempted to ask on what principle the sight of waving trees, harmless happy birds flitting by, or the blue distance of hanging woods beyond the marsh, are shut out from us here, as not conducive to a proper frame of mind, while at our elbows in the old nave benches are such things as the grotesque figure of a stout friar, a man "whose feet they hurt in the stocks," or the laughable presentment of a sluggard in bed? By all means let us preserve these things, as well as the clumsy wooden saints in the stall frontlets, but let them be tempered, where possible, by the sunshine of nature.

As regards the roof, it runs, as we have said, in an unbroken length from the tower to the east wall, and consists of nine complete bays with an extra half bay at the east end. Each bay is comprised within principal rafters, resting with a low pitch upon short curved struts, and divided by ten plain rafters, laid flatwise; there is a moulded ridge-beam and longitudinal purlins.

Now, this is a construction of the commonest and plainest Perpendicular kind, and the carpenter having done his work, the painter was called in to decorate and emphasize it. The artist accordingly arranged the following scheme. He painted the whole of the timbers pure white. He then painted the boarding between the rafters in alternate sets of three, namely in red, grey, and white. The principal timbers were now decorated with red, purple, and green zigzags, and waves, alternating with the white ground. The rafters were ornamented, alternately, in the upper and lower compartments of the bays with bright red *thc*'s, having red floriations with green leaves, and with green heart-shaped flowers with red floriations, each flower containing the red letter *K*. At the junction of the ridge with the beams is an elaborate circular boss flanked east and west by angels with brilliant outspread wings, holding shields of arms, and wearing golden coronets.

The red ground of the boarded space between the rafters is alternately spangled, in the three bays, with

large grey and white stars—namely, grey upon red, white upon grey, and grey upon white. Other shields of arms are fixed at the junction of the purlins with the principal timbers, and so the general scheme is completed. It is quite impossible in words to give a comprehensive idea of this intricate and subtle decoration.<sup>1</sup>

From the careful examination which Mr. Fox had made of the roof, it appears that the main decorations are stencilled, but not with rigid accuracy, and that the floriations are painted with a free hand.

Standing in the north-east corner of the north aisle, and looking south-west, through the arcades, when the sun is streaming in, and casting the long slanting shadows of the lead lattices down the sloping sills of the clerestory, is a scene of great brightness. Glimpses are caught of the now subdued painting of the once brilliant roof, and the eye lights upon the figures of the angels with their gorgeous wings. They are shown in white or ermine tippets, and are covered with a series of large rainbow-tinted feathering, to the knees where the bodies stop with much propriety against the great grey and crimson cloud-like bosses. The faces are very good, and the treatment of the yellow hair, in broad curling clusters, confined round the temples by plain golden coronets, each with a cross over the brow, is most successful. The whole indicates that if we had not in East Anglia in the fifteenth century, men who could paint such heavenly roofs and angels as Gaudenzio, at least we may be sure that, if the violent end of religious art had not come when, and as it did in England, we were then well on the road to the formation of an English School that might have attracted Italian artists to this country as we now go to Italy.

But it was not to be, and “murder was committed with the sword of justice.”

With regard to the woodwork, the stalls of the Chantry, founded by John Hopton, in 1452, have been much tampered with, and what remains of them has been removed into the chancel. They exhibit in the frontlets a series of clumsy wooden figures of the Apostles, distin-

<sup>1</sup> Through the kindness of Mr. G. E. Fox, Mr. Hartshorne was enabled to lay before the meeting some of his beautiful

drawings of Blythborough roof, which, from their minute accuracy, showed all that could possibly be desired.



guished by their emblems. There are also two quartered coats of Hopton.

The rood screen has been, of course, deprived of its loft, and sawn off four feet six inches from the floor. The parcloles have been whitewashed, and "the very base-string of humility has been sounded."

In the nave are many of the original benches, with short ends, after the manner of the Eastern counties. The heads are carved with subjects, not altogether conducive to reverence, and perhaps the four seasons are also intended. The lectern is a well-known example. There is also a panelled reliquary, now an alms box.

There are eighteen indents of brasses. Among them two of priests, eight of ladies, and eight of civilians; all these are on the floor of the church. There is a military indent on the tomb of John Hopton, and one on that of the last of the Swillingtons. There is also a tomb of a priest in white stones in the form of a cross, and incised with a mullet-footed chalice. The floors are now paved with such a curious assortment of ugliness that it is not easy to eliminate any part of the ancient floor. But it does appear that the first floor was composed of glazed black, yellow, and dark-green tiles.

Among a chaos of coal, coke, broken wood, decayed old hymn books, and hassocks in the tower, is preserved a most rare relic, a wooden *Jack o' the Clock*. This dates from about 1470, and may be compared with another, with which the common enemy has dealt more gently at Southwold.

In the tower is also housed another curious object. This is a great hook, fixed on a pole, with a ring at the other end. This was for use in the case of fire. The old houses in this part of the world were made of wood and plaster, and the practice was to arrest the progress of the flames by making gaps. The burning houses were accordingly attacked with this implement, and, horses being harnessed to the other end, clear spaces were speedily opened. A destructive fire happened at Blythborough in 1678, and perhaps this hook was made at that time on the usual principle of locking the door when the horse was gone.

Such was the wise procedure at Manchester in 1615,

when, after a grievous fire had befallen the town the inhabitants were taxed by local officials, called "myse-layers," for the purchase of "six ladders, xxiiij buckets, four ropes, and four hookes for the common good of the inhabitants."<sup>1</sup> Objects like these should be specially noticed because they are usually the first to vanish under the improving hand of the restorer.

Perhaps an apology is necessary for occupying so much time on this occasion, but the fact is that in speaking of a place like this, where so many subjects require treatment, the difficulty is to decide what to deal with and what to leave out. The heraldry alone, a subject which, like ancient coins, is almost concentrated history, we have been, for the present, at least, forced to abandon entirely.

But no one with any reverence for antiquity can quit such a place as Blythborough without pondering upon the strange vicissitude of things, as shown in the fallen state of this once important centre. And we revolve these thoughts in our mind as we wend our way back to Southwold along the course of the Blyth; the feelings may be chastened but the eye is refreshed by glimpses of the shining river still stealing on as of yore, quiet and unchanged, "its surface burnished into gold by the hot afternoon sun, and rippled only by the kiss of the stooping swallow, or the light track of the passing waterfly."

<sup>1</sup> See notice of the Court Leet Records of the Manor of Manchester from the year 1552 to the year 1686," by J. P. Earwaker.